

Tell CIA pullout advice to Nixon

By Morton Kondracke
and Thomas B. Ross

Sun-Times Bureau

Copyright, 1971, Chicago Sun-Times

WASHINGTON — The Nixon administration was advised by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1969 that it could immediately withdraw from Vietnam and "all of Southeast Asia would remain just as it is at least for another generation."

Government documents revealed Friday that the CIA offered the following prediction of what would happen if President Nixon, at the start of his administration, had pulled all U.S. troops out of Vietnam and opened the way to a possible Viet Cong take-over of the Saigon government:

"We would lose Laos immediately. Sihanouk would preserve Cambodia by a straddling effort. All of Southeast Asia would remain just as it is at least for another generation.

"Thailand, in particular, would continue to maintain close relations with the U.S. and would seek additional support. Simultaneously, Thailand would make overtures and move toward China and the Soviet Union. It would simply take aid from both sides to preserve its independence.

"North Vietnam would consume itself in Laos and South Vietnam. Only Laos would definitely follow into the Communist orbit."

In totally rejecting the so-called domino theory on which U.S. policy was based in the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the CIA took a position consistent with a long line of estimates dating back to the original U.S. involvement in 1954.

For example, the documents show that on May 25, 1964, the CIA declared in a National Intelligence Estimate that the United States would "retain considerable leverage in South-

Robert McNamara's doubts in 1966 on escalating the war revealed, Page 6.

east Asia even if Laos and South Vietnam came under North Vietnamese control."

The CIA produced the estimate as part of its pessimistic assessment of the value of launching a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. It argued that air attacks were unlikely to break Hanoi's will and carried the danger of escalating the war into a direct confrontation with Communist China and the Soviet Union.

"Retaliatory measures which the North might take in Laos and South Vietnam," the CIA declared, "might make it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to regard its objectives as attainable by limited means. Thus, difficulties of comprehension might increase on both sides as scale of action mounted."

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson rejected the CIA's advice and started sustained bombing in February, 1965.

Similarly, President Nixon disregarded the CIA estimate in 1969 and decided on a slow withdrawal, an expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos and a partial revival of the bombing of North Vietnam.

On several occasions since coming to office, Mr. Nixon has referred to immediate, total U.S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia as "precipitate" and the equivalent of "our defeat and humiliation."

In various ways, he has signaled an intention to preserve non-Communist governments in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Instead of pulling out of Vietnam rapidly, Mr. Nixon has withdrawn gradually, to give the South Vietnamese a "reasonable chance" to maintain their present government.

U.S. troop levels were at 540,000 when Mr. Nixon took office. They are scheduled to be down to 181,000 by Dec. 1, close to the end of Mr. Nixon's third year in office. The President has not said when — if ever — U.S. forces will be completely gone from Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nixon stoutly denied that the invasions of Cambodia in 1969 and Laos in 1970 constituted expansions of the war or were even related to political conditions in those countries.

In 1969, U.S. troops joined South Vietnamese forces in the invasion, while the Laos incursion was conducted by Vietnamese ground forces supported by U.S. planes and helicopters.

Mr. Nixon defended both actions as efforts to speed the "end of the war" in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the administration has exhibited interest in preserving the non-Communist character of the governments of Laos and Cambodia.

There has been a massive infusion of military and economic aid to the anti-Communist regime of Lon Nol in Cambodia, and U.S. air power continues to support South Vietnamese and Cambodian army combat operations

The Cambodian operations began on the

heels of Lon Nol's overthrow of Sihanouk, the man the CIA predicted would retain power if the United States left Southeast Asia. The United States did not leave, and Sihanouk fell. In some quarters, his overthrow has been ascribed to the CIA.

In Laos, the United States has continued extensive bombing raids both along the Ho Chi Minh infiltration routes in the southern part of the country and in north Laos near the Plain of Jars.

The north Laos operations — bombing and aid to anti-Communist guerrillas — are linked to retention of a neutralist government in Vientiane, the capital.

The government documents, disclosed to The Sun-Times by a number of reliable sources, show the CIA consistently reported that the bombing of North Vietnam was not effective, either in military or political terms.

The CIA's estimates, the documents also reveal, provided the basis for former Defense Sec. Clark Clifford's silent campaign to get the bombing stopped in 1968.

The CIA's Office of National Estimates advanced the case against the bombing in 1965 despite CIA Director John A. McCone's advice that U.S. planes "hit them harder, more frequently, and inflict greater damage."

In an April 2, 1965, memo to Sec. of State Dean Rusk, White House adviser McGeorge Bundy and Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor, McCone argued that Mr. Johnson's decision the previous day to commit U.S. troops to combat would work only "if our air strikes against the north are sufficiently heavy and damaging really to hurt the North Vietnamese."

He warned that a slow escalation of the bombing would open the U.S. government to "increasing pressure" from the press and public opinion to stop the raids.

Then, McCone concluded: "We will find ourselves mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win, and from which we will have extreme difficulty in extracting ourselves."

26 JUN 1971

Approved For Release 2001/03/04 : CIA-RDP80-01601R000300170025-7

Nixon Documents Revealed

CIA Advised in '69
U.S. Could Pull Out

This story is derived entirely from information distributed by United Press International and Associated Press.

The Chicago Sun-Times says just as it is at least for another in an article today that the generation.

Nixon administration was told: "Thailand, in particular, by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1969 that it could immediately withdraw from Vietnam and "all of Southeast Asia would remain just as it is at least for another generation."

In another article based on material from secret government documents, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch said yesterday that former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara told President Johnson privately in 1966 that military escalation in North and South Vietnam was not having the desired effect and reported he saw "no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon."

The Sun-Times, in a copyrighted story in Saturday's editions, says the CIA told Mr. Nixon at the beginning of his administration that withdrawal would result in the immediate loss of Laos.

The newspaper quotes a CIA advisory to the President as saying, Prince "Sihanouk would preserve Cambodia by a straddling effort. All of Southeast Asia would remain

would continue to maintain close relations with the U.S. and would seek additional support. Simultaneously, Thailand would make overtures and move toward China and the Soviet Union. It would simply take aid from both sides to preserve its independence.

"North Vietnam would consume itself in Laos and South Vietnam. Only Laos would definitely follow into the Communist orbit."

The CIA totally rejected "the so-called domino theory on which U.S. policy was based in the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations," the Sun-Times says, and followed a position consistent with a long line of estimates dating back to the original involvement in Vietnam in 1954.